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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000283

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SUBJECT: DISGRUNTLEMENT AT AL JAZEERA ENGLISH; IS A NEW
VISION IN THE OFFING?

Classified By: CDA MICHAEL A. RATNEY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Al Jazeera Network's English channel, less than two years out of the starting box, continues to hemorrhage middle and senior-level staff, including big names like American Dave Marash, who excoriated the station for taking on an anti-American bent. Charges that the English newsroom staff are anti-American "have some truth to them," Al Jazeera's (AJ) Managing Director Wadah Khanfar said, but the real problem is one of management. The station has followed too closely the BBC's model when it comes to breaking news, and this needs to change to fit audience expectations of seeing urgent issues presented quickly by young and dynamic presenters. Khanfar claimed that a recent flap over anti-Islamic comments by an Arab-American on a talk show prompted AJ's leadership to institute previously absent management controls over Arabic talk shows. Increasing editorial control from Doha over AJ's worldwide bureaus and talk shows may be a sign that the Qatari leadership intends to keep AJ's various channels and formats hewing as closely to Doha's political line as AJ's Arabic channel has done from the beginning. END SUMMARY

Marash AIRS DIRTY LAUNDRY

12. (C) The month of March saw further defections from the AJ English channel, including news director and former BBC executive Steve Clark, and former ABC "Nightline" presenter Dave Marash. Khanfar said it was "understandable" that Clark would ask to leave, since his wife, Jo Burgin, is suing the station over accusations of discrimination. It was also "time for him to move on and let someone more dynamic take over." Khanfar said he wished that Marash had not taken his frustrations out on AJ in the media after he quit. Marash, he said, was "too old" and "didn't look right" seated next to a younger, more attractive co-anchor, and so he was upset when AJ moved him out of his anchor position to produce special programs regarding the U.S. elections. Khanfar said he was "dissappointed" that Marash had taken his disagreements with Al Jazeera public.

13. (U) Marash, in an April 4 interview with the Columbia Journalism Review, stated that his removal as anchor at the Washington bureau meant that there were now "zero American accents in any of the presenter roles at Al Jazeera," and that editorial control was being exerted more and more from the Doha headquarters. That is why, he explained, Doha "literally sneaked a production team into the United States" and then "they went off and shot a four-part series (on

poverty) that was execrable."

14. (U) Marash asserted that AJ English's increasingly shoddy reporting with regard to the United States was a conscious decision by senior Qatari officials that following "the American political ideal of global, universalist values...was no longer the safest or smartest course, and that it was time, in fact, to get right with the region." That is why the Qataris have "made up" with the Saudis and Al Jazeera has concentrated on stories that are "boosterish...of Saudi Arabia," according to Marash. He added, however, that Al Jazeera's coverage "south of the equator" is "terrific."

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

15. (C) The loss of heavy hitters like Dave Marash followed a steady stream of lower-level staff who have left over reported benefit cuts and an inability of senior management to intervene on their behalf. Hamad al-Kuwari, an AJ board member and former Qatari Minister of Information, told PAO that the AJ staff were "whining" a great deal, but were not really leaving. The true problem with AJ English, he maintained, is that the British employees are "arrogant and unwilling to listen." They are "acting like colonialists" and are not easy to satisfy.

16. (C) Wadah Khanfar told PAO that there was "some truth" to the accusations of anti-Americanism among British staff members, but that AJ English needed to "move away from the BBC model of not airing breaking news immediately while they gather more information and conduct interviews." Khanfar

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explained that "audiences have become accustomed to tuning into satellite channels to see breaking news right away. If something is happening in the world and I turn on AJ English, I want to see the news, not an analysis of a small African tribe somewhere."

17. (C) Khalid Ali Johar, a Qatari who is nominally in charge of human resources for Al Jazeera, was quoted in a front-page article in the local English daily "Gulf Times" on April 7 as saying that the staff departures were "not a red line for us to be worried about. We had 25 resignations by the end of March, which is a normal figure regarding turnover in a large organization like ours." He added that, contrary to rumors, there would be no "relaunch" of AJ English.

MANAGEMENT - FOR A CHANGE

18. (C) PAO asked Khanfar what steps AJ was taking to prevent unprofessional gaffes from recurring. Asked to cite an example, PAO offered the recent flap over comments by Arab-American Wafa' Sultan on the popular talk show "The Opposite Direction," which were widely viewed as anti-Islamic, and caused AJ to offer an on-air apology. Khanfar said he took the incident very seriously and had ordered a committee to provide him with recommendations for corrective action.

19. (C) The first step, he said, was to introduce management controls. Previously, presenters such as Faisal al-Qasim were allowed to choose themes, guests, and questions with no oversight. Now, a producer has been appointed for each talk show, who will have approving authority for the selection of themes and guests. The producer will answer to the senior news editor, who will also have oversight authority.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Previously, one of the most common criticisms we heard from AJ employees was how little management oversight was exerted on a daily basis. AJ English's top executive, Nigel Parsons, was reportedly not even consulted when benefits packages were changed and other decisions were made.

Now that Doha appears to be exerting more editorial control and introducing management oversight, senior staff are beginning to chafe. As Dave Marash remarked, AJ English is now becoming less of a "multipolar news channel" and more of "an authentic regional voice," much like AJ Arabic. As a consequence, balanced and professional coverage of the United States is now less likely to be seen on AJ English -- a fact that will make it all the more difficult to market the station to major U.S. cable providers, which Khanfar claims is a primary goal -- but may not be particularly important to Qatari officials who view AJ, both English and Arabic, as important tools of Qatari foreign policy.

RATNEY